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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [NATO](#) [AL](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR WARNS OPPOSITION LEADER AGAINST LOSING
NATO

REF: A. TIRANA 204
[B](#). TIRANA 202
[C](#). TIRANA 200
[D](#). TIRANA 199

Classified By: Ambassador John L. Withers II, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[1](#). (C) In a one-on-one meeting with the Ambassador on March 20, Socialist Party (SP) Chair and Tirana Mayor Edi Rama declared flatly that "Prime Minister Berisha must go." In a lengthy monologue, Rama referred to Berisha's incompetence, corruption in his administration, Berisha's son's alleged involvement at the site of the March 15 explosion, the Prime Minister's "lies," and again to Berisha's corruption. During his rant, Rama intertwined the Gerdec explosion with the allegations being pursued in the long-predicted New York Times article concerning illegal Chinese arms shipments to Albania by a U.S. firm. (The two stories are firmly but incorrectly linked in the Albanian media, thanks to widespread e-mail messages drawing connections between the two.) Rama then insisted he was doing his best to cooperate with the government, but was forced by public outrage, anger, and by Berisha's "lies" to push for the PM to resign. (Rama had telephoned the Ambassador on March 17 to say SP would not force a governmental crisis.) Rama also asserted that Berisha had lied to the Embassy, as well, in the context of the recent tender for passports and ID cards, from which, according to Rama, the GOA had excluded U.S. companies. (The tender to which Rama refers closed on February 28. In point of fact, no U.S. companies presented a leading bid, but four of the competing consortia bids have U.S. investment or partner companies. There were irregular changes in the tender parameters very late in the process, about which the Embassy complained on behalf of interested U.S. companies.)

[2](#). (C) Ambassador provided Rama no comfort. He fully supported the need to hold the government accountable and the right of the public to protest peacefully and democratically. In fact, these are welcome developments in Albania. He made absolutely clear, however, that a political meltdown over the next two weeks could have the most serious consequences for Albania's NATO invitation, if skeptical European Allies seize on the issue as a casus belli to prove that Albania remains unready for NATO membership. If Albania missed this opportunity, it would be difficult to predict when the next one might come. Ambassador passed a briefer version of this same message to Movement for Socialist Integration's (LSI) Ilir Meta in a March 17 phone call.

[3](#). (C) COMMENT: Rama was at his theatrical best during the meeting -- gestures, facial expressions, dramatic vocal intonations. The presentation was an obvious trial balloon to see how much leeway the opposition would have in forcing a political confrontation with Berisha to a conclusion. The Ambassador's message was that Albania's political leadership -- Berisha, Rama, Meta, and all the others included -- faces a perhaps unfair but vital challenge: Failure to unify in

the face of tragedy could only be understood as the type of political immaturity Albania's critics have long held against it and could attempt to use to block an invitation at Bucharest.

¶4. (C) COMMENT, CONTINUED: Our reading thus far is that neither public anger nor opposition maneuvering can bring Berisha's resignation, absent a smoking gun from the ongoing investigation. (Recent contacts with the police, as well as Prosecutor General Rama's request for independent USG assistance in the investigation, suggest it is thus far proceeding determinedly and without political interference.) Given the PM's renowned reputation for pugnaciousness, he will not easily acquiesce to seeing the "glory" of a potential NATO invitation go to anyone but himself. Nevertheless, the prospect of m(ore wrangling on the eve of the Bucharest Summit is anything but a positive development. WITHERS